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Support Seen for Cut in U.S. Covert Operations Fund

By ELLEN HUME, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—Charging that the Reagan Administration is misleading Congress and the public about the scope and purpose of secret U.S. support for anti-Sandinista forces in Nicaragua, a California member of the House Intelligence Committee says a committee consensus is developing to cut back funds for covert operations.

Rep. Norman Y. Mineta (D-San Jose), a member of the committee since it was formed in 1977, said in an interview that he decided to voice his concerns because he believes U.S. involvement with the rebel forces is "out of control" and is leading to "a very grave situation in Nicaragua."

'We Can Also Delay Funding'

"We don't have veto authority," he said of the committee members. "We can express concern . . . and we can also deny funding. Not as it relates to a specific operation, but we can draw down the contingency reserves."

The committee plans to meet today with Secretary of State George P. Shultz and William P. Clark, the President's national security adviser, before taking formal action, Mineta said.

He accused the CIA and Reagan Administration officials of "setting up" members of the House Intelligence Committee and "hiding behind our skirts" by briefing the committee in secret and then giving contradictory information to the public and the press.

"The ante keeps on building up, and it's done in a covert way so the public really doesn't know how much money we're pouring into it," Mineta said. "Yet it's obvious we've got a war going on down there. No one knows how much we're putting in down there. We can't talk about it. The Administration will leak what is going to be to their advantage."

Mineta said media estimates that the United States has armed and helped to train 2,000 to 4,000 guerrillas fighting against the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua are not accurate.

"The size of the operation is very large," Mineta said. "And it's so different (now) from what the original (U.S.) objective was. The original objective was to interdict arms supply (from the Nicaraguans to leftist rebels in El Salvador)," he said.

Asked if he believes the American people are being deceived when they are told the United States is not trying to overthrow the Nicaraguan government, Mineta declared:

"I think they are, in the sense that the Administration has not acknowledged this as their stated policy. If you say: 'Is it the purpose of the government to overthrow the Sandinista government?' They'll say: 'Absolutely not.' Is the President lying, or is he just being deceptive? Or has he lost control? Is it that he doesn't understand, or has he lost control?"

At a press conference last Thursday, President Reagan confirmed that the United States is helping the anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan guerrillas, but he maintained that "anything we're doing in that area is simply trying to interdict the supply lines. . . . We are not doing anything to try to overthrow the Nicaraguan government."

Nonetheless, House Intelligence Committee Chairman Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.) said last week that he believes the "evidence is very strong" that the Reagan Administration is violating a law, which bears Boland's name, that specifically forbids U.S. assistance "for the purpose" of overthrowing the Nicaraguan government.

Mineta said the Administration has misled the public not only about the scope and purpose of the U.S. involvement in Nicaragua but also about the Nicaraguan government's military strength.

At his press conference, Reagan said Nicaragua "has created the biggest military force in all of Central America"—an army of 25,000 backed by a 55,000-man

militia and armed with Soviet weapons such as heavy-duty tanks and an air force including helicopter gunships, fighter planes and bombers.

"I really would like to see what he means," Mineta said. "I don't think they have any bombers. And if he's talking about gunships, I don't think they exist. The fighters—they may have some propeller-driven airplanes down there. . . . They don't have any jets. And there's the Administration alluding to the fact that the Cubans are supplying MIGs down there. . . . There's nothing of the sort."

"I just don't think what's getting out in the public realm right now is really factual," Mineta said. "I don't have the confidence that I'm being told the truth by the CIA either. . . . As a member of the Intelligence Committee, I just don't have confidence in the kind of information we're getting."

'You Don't Do It With Arms'

Asked what he thought the U.S. government should do to counter Communist intrusions in Central and South America, Mineta concluded:

"You don't do it with arms, first of all. People are saying there's got to be a political solution. The Pope used the word *dialogue*."

"One of the lessons we learned in Vietnam is that no amount of arms being poured into a country is going to win the war for you. I think in that sense it's comparable. We're going to continue to pour arms in. It seems to me that that's what our policy is doing."

"If our objective is to cut off the supply line of arms, if we think that is what is happening from Nicaragua to the rebels of El Salvador, then is what we are doing the right way to go about it? I don't think so," Mineta said. "It's an important enough issue that it really ought to be debated in the open."